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ABSTRACT

A state superintendent of education discusses standards from the point of view of a policymaker, acknowledging both educational and political elements. The objective for the policymaker is to take the work of researchers and educational theorists and make it something that practitioners and ultimately the public can understand. The first thing is to avoid the esoteric so that public support can be built. Second, the policymaker needs to make sure that the standards are simply and clearly stated. A third recommendation for the standard setting process is to turn the responsibility for solving difficult problems over to the people who actually are closest to the problem. Involving those who are most likely to oppose proposed standards is, in the long run, the practical thing to do. The experience of Illinois shows the importance of stakeholder involvement. Quality assurance, the place of educational technology, and the uses of assessment are considerations the person responsible for implementing standards cannot ignore. In the final analysis, nothing can be accomplished without the resources to change approaches to teaching and learning. (SLD)

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ED 412 243

PERSPECTIVES ON STANDARD SETTING FROM A POLICY MAKERS POINT OF VIEW

AERA CONFERENCE
MARCH, 1997

Joseph A. Spagnolo
Illinois State Superintendent of Education

Thank you and good afternoon. I'm the guy who has an office ten blocks away from here and was late for the festivities. I do apologize.

I've been asked to address this issue from a policymaker's point of view whatever that is. I'm not sure exactly how one would define that. I think the operative word in that statement is a policymaker's point of view because there are a variety of policymakers in each of the various states that have an awful lot to say about this very important topic.

I believe that this perspective really is bound up in two fundamental elements. One is an educational element and the other is a political element. You heard a great deal today from experts who obviously know a great deal about the educational side, psychometrician side, and the psychologist side.

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Those of you who are intrinsically involved in putting these things together so they make sense from the perspective of an educator, from the perspective of accomplishing something that has reliability, validity, and all those important things.

Guys like me are responsible to take that good work and try not to mess it up so bad that nobody recognizes it when it comes out on the other end, and I will tell you that is a daunting task because in this state, for example, we have 177 legislators, 9 members of a State Board of Education, and a Governor's staff, all of whom know more about this than I do.

My objective and I assume those that do the work that I do in the various states will try our darnest to take the good work of the educators, and the psychometricians, and the psychologists, and the assessment experts and distill it down into something that those people and the people that they represent can understand. So if I would use the Illinois experience as a model simply because it's the only experience I really have intimate knowledge of I would say rule #1 from a policymaker's perspective is to keep it simple.

To remember that the "main thing is the main thing" and don't become so esoteric in the language that we use and the approach that we take that people

become fearful of it and immediately walk away because I can tell you from experience once that happens you're dead in the water.

The second thing I would recommend is that whatever standards we set we'll be sure that the expectation is simply stated but also clearly stated. That we know, for example, that if we want third graders to add fractions we say that in some way. That the man on the street and Johnny's or Suzy's Mom and Dad will know that's what you mean.

The third recommendation I would make as we go through this process is to turn the responsibility for solving all the difficult problems that we face over to the people that are closest to the problem. In that sense, I thing public engagement involving parents, involving teachers, involving critics, involving those who would be most opposed to what we're trying to accomplish have to be at the table at the beginning. Our process, and I won't dwell on it too much because we simply don't have time, involves a 17 member external review group that consists of parents, teachers, etc., but also has representation from the Christian Coalition, and the Family Institute, and Concerned Women for America. Now that may not be a popular thing to do at the beginning but I'll tell you it's a smart thing to do if you want to get through this in some way that you wind up with a good result.

And lastly, I think it is important to replace bureaucratic structures that are often used and applied to this kind of an effort with collaborations and partnerships.

The entity that takes this on by themselves, and I don't care whether if it's borne of the teacher union, or the legislator, or the State Board of Education, or the college or university community and says we can do this by ourselves, are headed for disaster. It simply won't work.

You've got to involve stakeholders and shareholders and people who are interested in this on a broad-base. We have to clearly define what we expect students to know and be able to do. We have to link all those other broad policy areas together. I don't know how many times I'm asked in this state and we have over 900 school districts in Illinois by the way, we have a dubious distinction in that respect, 2 million kids, someone will always stand in the back of the room and say how does this relate to assessment? How does this relate to accountability? How does this relate to teacher preparation? A key point is that all of the pieces have to be linked and in my view you have to approach this process of reform, standards-based reform, from a holistic point of view.

You can't take one piece and try to work it and try to be good with it and ignore the others. So as a consequence, we're working on everything at the same time. It's a little bit like chaos. It's the only way, in my view, that we can realistically approach it.

Just a word or two about our experience here and our experience here is similar to experiences in literally every other state is that we have involved over 28,000 people, individual people, in this discussion about what these standards ought to be over an 8 or 9 month period of time. I don't think I've ever been involved in a effort that involved that many individual people before. We have testimony and criticism of the drafts that's 2 1/2 feet high. We developed a process through the University of Illinois at Springfield to categorize all of that input and help inform what changes we need to make in the draft. Assessment systems - I see some people in the audience and up here who have been involved in discussions about assessment in this state for a long time. It seems likes it's always changing.

Nobody is quite satisfied with it. But as you develop new standards you have to bring along assessment systems that match those standards. Professional development - we in Illinois are engaged in a massive change in the way we educate teachers and how we deal with professional development which

is a subject onto itself but again you have to take care of all the pieces, you can't ignore some and concentrate on others.

Quality assurance - we've put in place a way in this state to visit schools in a meaningful basis that actually concentrates on teaching and learning. What happens to the standards? What happens to the assessment? What happens to the school climate and the culture for a young man or young women or child who actually goes through that process? Because we often lose focus on the main people in this enterprise and that's the children.

Technology - we believe that technology provides an opportunity for us to advance teaching and learning the likes of which we've never seen before and we have to integrate the standards into the technology. In this state we did not create a separate set of technology standards per say but we embedded the technology in the standards that we're about to set. A couple of questions and I'll conclude. What learning should be included in the standards? What's the role of the state-level system of standards via be what would occur at the school district level, or school level, or classroom level? And quite often I think those of us who work at the state-level have a tendency to have a global view of this process. That, too, needs to change because the teaching and learning occurs in the classrooms it doesn't occur in the Statehouse in Springfield or in my office here in

Chicago. Does standards and assessment provide useful information? If they don't this is an exercise in futility. One of the things that occurs on a regular basis in our state is I often go out and talk to teachers about what's going on in schools and they say "Oh heavens, we had to stop teaching for three weeks so we could get ready for the IGAP", which is our assessment program. Well it's a very telling and compelling point. If you have to stop to get ready to do the assessment something is wrong. Either the assessment is wrong, the standards are wrong, the curriculum is wrong, the instructional strategies are wrong, something's wrong.

I'm not smart enough to know what it is but I am smart enough to know that it's not right. How do standards affect the allocation of resources? A very important issue probably in all of the states and this state is no different. We have major equity problems in Illinois. I have a legislator that pounds on the table and says we're not going to give you any more money until you give us accountability.

I say fine, what does that mean? I get blank stares. Nobody knows what that means but they know they want more of it. So what we need to do is to be able to go forward and say look folks here they are. This is what we expect you know in the third grade in reading, math, science, social studies and all of those

things and this is the way we're going to measure it and we have involved all of these people in getting it done and we're going to give you an accountability system to beat the band but you've gotta give us the resources to change the approaches to teaching and learning because that's the essence of the game. If it doesn't effect what goes on in classrooms, if it doesn't add to greater student achievement, greater student understanding, ability to solve problems and all of those gooey things they don't like to talk about we haven't accomplished a thing.

So in a nutshell that's one policymaker's viewpoint. I appreciate the fact that all of these great minds are at work trying to figure out how we can exactly position ourselves to do good things and stay within the law but I believe that in this country we're finally on the right track and we seem to be making some progress in fits and starts certainly, but making some progress. Thank you.